

Chapter 19

Climate Change, Women's Rights, and the Way Forward: Notes on the Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The particular focus of this study is on bringing to light the differential nature of climate change effects across the population, as seen through the lens of Amartya Sen's crucial thesis on 'missing women.' We argue that there is a need for economists to map how climate change makes invisible women, particularly in the labour force. The precarious accessibility women have, and the freedom women enjoy by virtue of gaining access to education, housing, credit and so on, is doubly at risk from the effects of climate change. It is essential to bring to light the susceptibility of the labor market at large, and the susceptibility of women workers in particular, to the vagaries of nature. Be it in the form of heat stress, or global warming disrupting large scale supply chains, or even wiping out small industries, the impact of climate change on the labor market is substantially large and deserving of closer study, especially through a fruitful application of Sen's essential ideas on human development and gender parity.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-6069-9.ch019

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INTRODUCTION

The sight of Delhi ravaged by continuous heat spells (Mitra & Berlinger, 2024) has brought climate change back to the forefront of public discourse. Fainting spells amongst students and workers, closed shops and deserted streets seem an all-too-common sight in the wake of new extremes this summer's heat has brought with it. Social media users are aghast at images of birds who have passed away in the heat. While the summers seem increasingly dystopian, the myopic focus on the effects of climate change-induced erratic climatic patterns on the country's urban middle-class rings alarm bells: how is the countryside faring in the face of hitherto unseen extremities of heat?

Existing research indicates that the impact of climate change is largely differentiated along caste, class and gender. A recent study, for instance, found that the burden of heat stress disproportionately impacted workers from marginalized castes (Shah et al., 2024). Yet scholarship on the gendered burden of climate change remains scarce. Climate action plans tend to forego women's specific needs or dedicate inadequate attention and infrastructural support to them. Even as poverty and food insecurity are expected to disproportionately rise amongst women due to climate change, little is done to truly address the gendered impact of global warming.

From an economic perspective, it is crucial to assess the level and intensity of impact that climate change is expected to wreak in order to effectively devise policies to remedy the same. In particular, the labor market is expected to undergo major changes over the years as it adjusts itself to increasingly hostile conditions imposed by climate change. The beginnings of this transformation within the labor market are already visible, and this project will highlight the ways in which women laborers occupy a unique doubly disadvantaged position in the face of climate change. A truly intensive study of the distribution of the burden of climate change along the lines of gender is necessary for devising sustainable solutions to mitigate any crises that will surely arise in due course of time.

One of the most stellar contributions to providing a theory for the imbalanced sex ratios in India and China comes from Amartya Sen's work where he argues that nearly 100 million women were 'missing,' in the sense that they didn't exist, contrary to projections of their share in the population by experts (Sen, 1990). Most fascinating was that such a phenomenon seemed to be restricted largely to Asian countries, and more specifically to India and China, where patriarchal power relations continue to operate in insidious ways. Sen attributed the 'missing women' to a variety of causes: female feticide, women's precarious access to resources, and women's exposure to risk of gender-based violence. In recent times, research has shown how lower wages, that is the gender pay gap, may also have contributed to imbalance in the sex ratio in China (Qian, 2008). Having access to social security

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